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BEHIND THE CURTAINS

William Leavitt, who has spent more than 40 years exploring the dreams, illusions and artifice of Hollywood and everyday life, gets his first major museum show in his home base of L.A.

BY ANNIE BUCKLEY

WILLIAM LEAVITT MIGHT BE the most influential artist you've never heard of. An important and well-respected figure in the Los Angeles art community for more than four decades, Leavitt employs a range of mediums—painting, drawing, photography, installation, sculpture and theater—to create artworks that explore the drama inherent in everyday situations. Numerous artists, such as Mike Kelley, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Lari Pittman and Roy Dowell, have collected his work over the years, and he has had various gallery exhibitions in Los Angeles—including five solo shows with Margo Leavin, who has represented him since the mid-1990s. (John Baldessari introduced them to each other.) Yet Leavitt has had relatively limited exposure outside Southern California. And he has never been the subject of a museum survey. Enter "William Leavitt: Theater Objects" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, which will no doubt bring wider attention to this under-recognized artist.

The exhibition was the brainchild of Ann Goldstein—former senior curator at the museum and now director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam—and co-organized with MOCA curator Bennett Simpson. Working closely with the artist over a period of about three years, Goldstein and Simpson selected 90 works made since 1969, many of them loaned by

Right, William Leavitt: *California Patio*, 1972, mixed mediums, 8 by 12 by 8 feet. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"William Leavitt: Theater Objects"
at the Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles, through July 3.



other artists. Viewers now have the opportunity to see at once a significant portion of Leavitt's art, a cohesive and introspective body of work woven through with a sophisticated understanding of narrative and an acute level of observation.

A primary inspiration for Leavitt's work is Los Angeles, that desert-turned-metropolis built on dreams—first of gold and now of shimmering stars, a world of props and sets and fakery designed to lure people into a very real state of belief and empathy. Indeed, virtually all of Leavitt's installations resemble sets, and one, in fact, has been used as such for a theatrical piece by him. But while Hollywood plays an important role in his project, Leavitt is more interested in the many small communities in Los Angeles made up of stucco houses and scrub plants, the quiet neighborhoods held together by the same hopes and desires that fuel people everywhere. Resonating throughout his work is the ephemeral interplay of emotions and impulses that might, say, compel a kid to leave Kansas or Ohio and head west, or induce lovers to stay together despite boredom or infidelity. Leavitt's installations, and his drawings and paintings (showing empty chairs, unoccupied rooms), seem haunted by characters' dilemmas and conversations, and convey the complexity of human aspirations, however prosaic.

IN 1965, LEAVITT ARRIVED in California from Kansas, by route of Colorado, in order to study art at Claremont Graduate School. He was also a member of the National Guard Reserves. On his first day of military training, his unit gathered in one of Hollywood's back lots, each a thematic panorama rendered fast and cheap, a veneer of a Western town or Swiss chalet made of painted plywood or cardboard. The experience had a lasting impact. In an artist's statement for the Pasadena Armory Show in 1969, Leavitt recalled, "I loved the deception of going up to one of those perfect houses and opening the door and seeing that there was nothing but canvas and 2 1/4's holding it up. I thought that was spectacular: all the bricks were made of composition board."¹

This sense of illusion and, more importantly, of all that is necessary to construct and support such illusion has been integral to Leavitt's work ever since. The concern is evidenced by his frequent use of visible plywood supports to hold up elements in his installations and by his repeated references to curtains, those decorative tools of concealment. Leavitt seeks out what lies behind the facades, the scaffolding that makes movies—and art—possible as well as the longing and uncertainty that make invented realities so popular.

The installation *California Patio* (1972), which commands one gallery of the MOCA exhibition, is representative of Leavitt's practice. A freestanding wall is fitted with sliding glass doors, framed by blue curtains. Through the doors, an array of plants

and flagstones is visible, as are the plywood supports that hold the structure upright. The plants are fake, and, of course, there is no lawn beyond the patio. Likewise, the iconic vision of California that the work represents is as much dream as reality; even Angelenos who lack such a view through sliding glass doors (or any patio to speak of) imagine similar quiet scenes when tasked with describing California living.

This page, *Study for "The Lure of Silk,"* 1973, seven black-and-white photographs, 67 3/4 by 15 1/4 inches overall. MOCA, L.A.

Opposite, view of Leavitt's exhibition, 2011, at MOCA. Photo Brian Forrest.



ALTHOUGH SOME WORKS SHARE A COMMON NARRATIVE, EVEN STAND-ALONE PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS AND INSTALLATIONS READ LIKE PARTS OF ONE EXTENDED IDEA.

California Patio demonstrates Leavitt's consistent attention to the trappings of lifestyle and the play between artifice and actuality.

But there is something else about this early installation that illuminates Leavitt's interests and the direction his art would take. A text is taped to the wall. It begins: "A Summer evening in the backyard and garden of a contemporary hillside home in Southern California. There is a swimming pool, a flagstone patio, a redwood fence, some lawn, and the unusual tropical landscaping of succulents, ferns, leafy plants and flowering shrubs." In the succinct language of a film treatment, it goes on to explain the action. But contrary to Hollywood convention, the action in this case occurs elsewhere, at a cocktail party on an adjacent patio. The text explains what is happening offstage, next door:

The guests are all close friends of the host and hostess. Their presence adds the elements of motion and sound to the scene; the men standing near the edge of the patio engage in relaxed conversation, while the women sit in a loose circle of lawn chairs arranged on the lawn. Now the hostess comes out through the sliding glass doors on to the patio to announce that a light buffet supper is ready inside.

Such a mix of anticipation and intimacy has appeared throughout Leavitt's oeuvre. Although very few of his works include images of people, a sense of human habitation lingers in or around the spaces. (In the painting *Twin Lawn Chairs*, 1987, for example, two chairs sit side by side under a purple starlit sky, stand-ins for the pair that vacated the seats, perhaps only moments before.) The *California Patio* text also demonstrates an interest in narrative that is evident, too, in Leavitt's photographic works from that period. A montage from 1973, *Study for "The Lure of Silk,"* is a vertical column of black-and-white images—details of a living room (the edge of a couch, the lower half of a folding screen)—that resembles a filmstrip or the storyboard for a tale of domestic intrigue.

Leavitt's impulse for storytelling emerged in full in 1975 with his first play, *The Silk*. Leavitt explained that he wrote the play because "I just wanted to make a painting that functioned as an object within a narrative. I didn't want to get into the history of painting; I didn't want to be allegorical."² What resulted was a painting, *Orchid for "The Silk"*

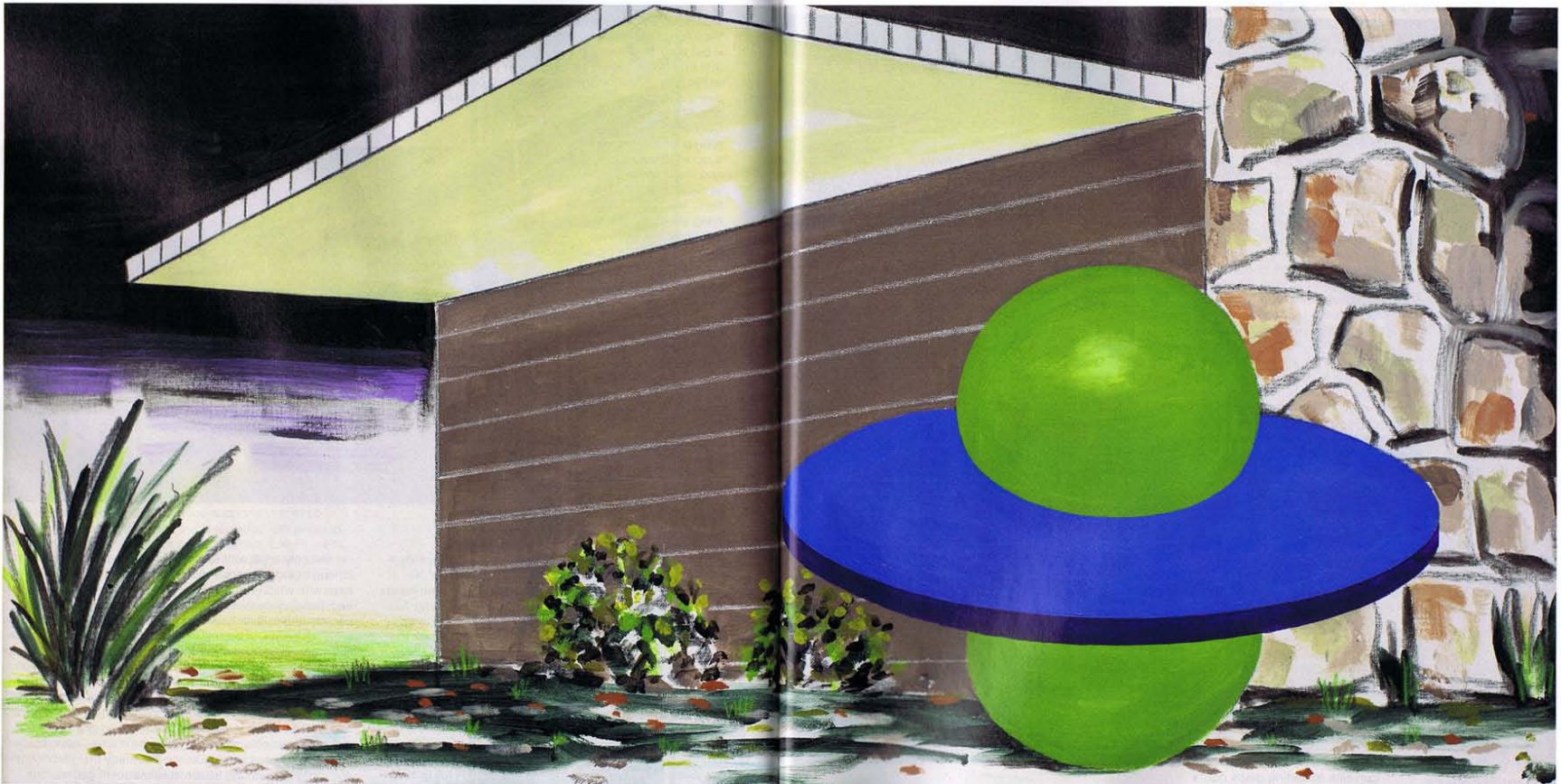
(1975)—an orchid, as specified in his stage directions—as well as drawings, photographs, and installations that all relate to the play. In the context of today's art world, in which artists readily take up a variety of mediums, Leavitt's integration of materials and approaches into a coherent whole is at once familiar and surprising. Though he is



not the only artist with so broad a practice, he stands out among both his peers and the current generation for the ease with which disparate parts of his work flow together and, like Guy de Cointet, for his use of theater within the context of art. Both Leavitt and de Cointet were part of a group of artists, including Baldessari, Michael Asher, Bruce Nauman, Allen Ruppersberg and Bas Jan Ader, who mined playful and at times humorous forms of Conceptual art on the West Coast during the 1960s and early '70s, outside the glare of any spotlight but the sun, while peers in New York received critical acclaim for their more austere Conceptual and Minimalist art. Additionally, Leavitt was one of the first artists to cast an analytical eye on the media—specifically, on the Hollywood film industry—a strategy that has become commonplace among artists of subsequent generations.

IN THE MOCA EXHIBITION, the spaces between Leavitt's various art objects stimulate related trains of thought, connecting one to the next. Although some pieces, like those related to *The Silk* or to other plays, share a com-

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House with Exercise Ball, 1987,
acrylic on canvas, 24 by 48 inches,
Collection Sherrie Levine, New York.

mon narrative, even stand-alone works read like parts of one extended idea. Paralleling modernist architecture in California, a building style that appears frequently in his art, Leavitt's works often depict a seamless flow of space from inside to outside. In the pastel drawing *Sliding Door* (1980), a cactus reaches in and around an open glass door bracketed by green curtains. The artificial brightness of the fabric contrasts with the deep green of the cactus, and the image is rendered on brown paper that doubles as the desert seen through the glass door in the picture. Leavitt consistently points to the drama inherent in the most benign moments; in *Sliding Door*, a seemingly innocuous intrusion is charged with the collision of nature and domesticity. Another gallery features a grouping of framed black-and-white photographs, each with a handwritten word functioning less as caption than as extension of the photograph. Collectively titled *Symbolic Objects* (1974/2008), the images appear opposite *Red Velvet Flame* (1974), a curtain hanging from a rod affixed to the wall, an electric torch with a plastic flickering flame placed to one side. Taken together, the photographs seem to indicate plot points in a narrative to be revealed when the curtain parts.

Los Angeles icons appear in Leavitt's work too, but like movie stars on the city's streets, they are less common sightings than the stucco and shrubbery. One of them appears in *Theme Restaurant* (1986), a painting of the unique establishment that has graced the Los Angeles airport for decades, looking like a recently landed spaceship. This work relates to many from the mid-'80s, when space-themed imagery began to crop up among Leavitt's depictions of apartment blocks and lawn chairs. The bright blue and yellow ball abandoned in a yard in the painting *House with Exercise Ball* (1987) looks suspiciously like a ringed planet, while the machine depicted in the pastel drawing *Rubidium Engine* (1986) resembles a cheerful spacecraft. This interest in science fiction came to the fore in a series of recent paintings, first exhibited in 2009 at Margo Leavin, showing giant molecules alighting on quiet L.A. hillsides.

Space-age themes and iconic Hollywood merge in the drawing *New Brown Derby* (1987), which depicts a crane beside a dome-shaped building frame, presumably a mid-construction restaurant in the new chain based on the 1929 original. This staple of old Hollywood moved several

times and was replaced eventually by a shopping center.

The restaurant's history of shifting locations and waves of copies—at once illusions of authenticity and sites for authentic experience—is the story of Los Angeles. It also calls to mind Leavitt's work in multiple mediums. In depicting the artifice necessary to stage not only a play but also a modernist living room—from plywood struts and velvet curtains to sliding glass doors and plastic plants—Leavitt reveals the very real desires and emotions, disappointments and frailties that lie behind such supports. ◊

Right, *Theme Restaurant*, 1986, oil on canvas, 46 by 72 inches. Collection Carolina Bilbao and Richard Massey, Miami.

1 Quoted in Ann Goldstein, "Theater of the Ordinary," *Theater Objects*, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011, p. 19. 2 Quoted in Annette Leddy, "Sliding Glass Doors and Elliptical Lights: The Iconography of William Leavitt," *ibid.*, p. 23.

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